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THE AETA CONVENTION IN LOS ANGELES

JAMES E. POPOVICH

In the October issue of the *Educational Theatre Journal*, Frank Whiting outlined the projected 1955 convention and promised AETA members three exciting, absorbing days. The many delegates who attended the Los Angeles convention were not disappointed: there was the usual evidence of everyone taking genuine pleasure in meeting people from all parts of the country with similar problems and interests. Even the California weather lived up to the most extravagant advertising.

Delegates usually seem to favor meetings in Chicago and particularly New York because of the available professional theatre. Although Los Angeles proved to be quite barren theatre-wise, the convention program was exciting and rewarding enough to occupy fully the attention of the delegates. For the members found that the program which the Vice-President had promised was just as good in execution as it had looked on paper. The program was varied, full, well-balanced, and, on many occasions, intellectually exciting.¹

James E. Popovich, Assistant Professor of Speech and Drama at the University of Georgia, member of the Governing Board of CTC, and Program Chairman of 1956 CTC Convention, served as Reporter for the 1955 AETA Convention.

¹ Author's note: While assuming full responsibility for this interpretation, I would like to acknowledge the help of the following

Setting high standards for thoughtful and provocative speeches of the conference was David Sievers who gave the main address at the banquet of the Southern California Section of AETA. Speaking on "Freudian Psychology and the Theatre," Sievers discussed the contribution Freudian psychology has made to the American playwright and whether or not this Freudian influence has been good or bad. He contended that the unconscious battle within the individual has become one of the most persistent themes in American drama for the past thirty-five years, citing O'Neill as the popularizer of this technique with his *Diff'rent* and *Strange Interlude*. And he enumerated the various defense-mechanisms used by many characters in modern plays to shield and protect themselves from unwanted impulses. Sievers concluded that Freudian psychology has had a great influence on modern drama, resulting in many valuable problem-solving experiences for the audience.

I

The best attended sectional meetings were those devoted to playwriting. At-

who served as observers at some of the various meetings: Faber DeChaine, Kenneth Dorst, Henry Goodman, Julio Francescutti, Paul Kozelka, Joel Rubin, Wallace Smith, Wilber Stevens, Lillian Voorhees, and John Wray Young.

tendance at the Wednesday morning session numbered nearly three hundred delegates. An interested audience heard a series of short individual talks followed by a question-and-answer discussion on the general theme: how to bridge the gap between the new playwright and the professionally established playwright; how we look for the new playwright, what training we give him, what early production opportunities he has, and what his prospects are for professional production? E. C. Mabie began by raising the question: "Are we not in the midst of an industrial revolution in playwrighting similar to the 1912 revolution in journalism?" He cited the University of Iowa graduate program as one instance of an academic institution which encourages creative work in fine arts for a graduate degree. He contended that a school should consider the creative mind in the fine arts as important as the creative mind in the sciences.

Patterson Greene, drama critic for the *Los Angeles Examiner*, spoke of the critic's problems in searching for new plays. He warned that if a play attracts a large audience, it has some importance, since the mass audience has been the support of great playwrights in the past. Greene also pointed out that the newspaper critic is a reporter concerned with accurate accounting of the play's reception. Walther Volbach was unable to be present but his message, dealing with Texas Christian University's production of new plays, was read. He observed that audiences, actors, and authors have been enthusiastic but that, with one exception, the press in his area has been indifferent.

In discussing the relationship of the educational and professional theatre, James Allardice, professional writer for screen and television, felt that the educa-

tional theatre should look to the amateur writer and treat his play not as a showcase for Broadway but as a means of training. C. Lowell Lees recommended that colleges provide a creative atmosphere for young playwrights by having gifted directors and actors work on new scripts. The young playwright needs the working advantage of a good production.

Valentine Davies, a screenwriter, urged that young playwrights not limit themselves by aiming solely at the Broadway theatre. He theorized that if the young playwright would regard himself not as a playwright that has to be seen on Broadway but as a writer for the mass market (radio and television), he will have tremendous opportunities for success.

During the panel discussion which followed, Allardice cited the antagonism college playwrighting teachers have against comedy and commercial plays. He claimed they overstress the "poetic serious." A lengthy discussion also centered on the encouragement of young writers for television. Kenneth Macgowan referred to television and film as "a gluttonous machine which eats up material at a tremendous rate."

A special luncheon devoted to playwrighting followed, with Kenneth Macgowan presiding. During the discussions, it was pointed out that some subsidization of new playwrights must be effected (through fellowships, etc.) in helping them so that they do not have to dissipate their energies in making a living by doing other work. George Seaton claimed that playwrighting is difficult to do on the side if one is a screenwriter.

That evening, around eighty of the delegates continued their deliberations about playwrighting problems at another special session. This was a lively three-hour session in which ideas were raised,

discussed, clarified, approved or disapproved. George Hamlin described the purpose of the New Dramatists' Committee, which, he says, "bridges the gap between the time the playwright begins to write good plays and the time he gets produced" by attempting to create for him the right climate so that he can operate much like playwrights of the past who were a part of the theatrical companies.

II

Sessions devoted to acting were equally as stimulating. At the Wednesday meeting, titled "Theory and Research," four speakers found an interested audience. Donal Harrington discussed the necessity for actors to understand the manners, postures, gestures of each of the historical periods. The properly trained actor needs, in addition to his basic training, advanced work in styles. He outlined the methods employed in teaching acting at his school, emphasizing the need for careful training in action and voice. Marjorie Dycke indicated that one of the great difficulties in discussing acting is the loose and confusing use of such terms as "technique," "method," and "acting." She related her experiences in polling actors about their techniques. Katherine Cornell had replied that she was unable to describe her exact procedure because of the amount of studying and thinking on each role *beyond* the technique. Miss Dycke also discussed the problem with members of Actors' Studio who indicated that generally they felt acting must be experienced and not talked about, since many actors who can glibly or penetratingly speak about their characters frequently fail to communicate to an audience. Miss Dycke concluded that the art of acting is a highly personal one since "there is no custom-made magic cloak."

Leo Lavendero illustrated his discussion with a demonstration of rhythmic improvisation. This exercise, if done in the acting classes, would produce the three essentials of Stanislavsky's method: concentration, relaxation, and justification. He urged that such exercises be continued over a long period by constantly changing character attitudes and by gradually adding speech.

The fourth speaker was the professional stage and screen actor Robert Ryan, who discussed the difficulties of acting. Quoting a friend's comment that "an actor needs a low level of stability and a high I.Q.," Ryan felt that a high I.Q. was not particularly necessary. He told of the difficulties of acting for films, emphasizing that camera work was more rigid and confining without giving the actor proper opportunities for rehearsals, improvisations, or an audience feeling. He stated that film and stage acting needed the same amount of artistic energy and that colleges which train actors should emphasize the classics and concentrate on style.

A session devoted to demonstrations on the fundamentals of acting was also scheduled with Claribel Halstead, Robert Rence, and Jess Kimmell discussing and showing the various procedures of training and evaluating actors for stage, screen, or the educational theatre. There was a general consensus from this session that training, to be effective, had to be intensive and provocative. The actor must learn to think and evaluate, to enlarge his experiences in life, and be able to translate them through the art of acting to the stage.

George Seaton, President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, made a splendid contribution to the AETA convention when he spoke on the screenplay as motion picture

drama. With a definite prejudice against the new emphasis on wide screen and its resulting limitations, Seaton briefly traced the early history of the flexible camera and its effect upon the screenwriter. Seaton believes that Dudley Nichols is the best screenwriter turned out by Hollywood. Seaton conjectured that the wide screen film play is beginning to resemble the stage play more and more while the theatre, of late, has borrowed more and more from the screen. "If you want to see a good intimate motion picture, your chances are better in the theatre than the movie house." In recognition of his outstanding contribution to dramatic writing for the stage and films, Seaton was awarded an honorary membership in AETA. The presentation, on behalf of the organization, was made by Kenneth Macgowan at the conclusion of Seaton's speech.

At the same session devoted to the screenplay, Denis Sanders discussed the problems of adapting the short story for the screen. Sanders concluded that the short story that lends itself easily to adaptation, requiring a minimum number of dramatic ideas from the adaptor, with well-drawn characters in contrast with one another, is a story which gives the screenwriter the best possibilities for transferring it to film.

III

The discussion of presentational *versus* representational plays for the arena theatre also made for an exciting session. Paul Hostetler advocated the inclusion of representational plays in the arena repertory, since it is in the arena theatre "that we may condition audiences to believe that we are *representing* real people in real situations." Hostetler cautioned, however, that the final determinant in the choice of any play for production is the worth of a play. Lee Mitchell proposed that the arena

theatre is the ideal situation for producing presentational plays. He contended that the shape of the arena and the absence of background seem to favor "mobile rather than pictorial spectacle" and that this mobile spectacle appears to be enhanced "by a quality of depth the arena gives which the proscenium stage generally denies it." Mitchell also indicated that direct contact between actor and audience is facilitated in the arena because of the absence of the orchestra pit and other barriers. An opposite point of view was advanced by Maxim Popovich who felt that presentational plays were inappropriate to the arena method of staging because of the limitations imposed upon the director, due to scenic and empathic conditions.

Two other sectional meetings attracted and interested many delegates. A session was devoted to a discussion of the film in drama instruction. Robert Hall, William Mehrling, and George King analyzed the film as a device for broadening the experience of students in acquainting themselves with dramatic technique, for demonstrating the duties of respective members of the production team, and for preserving the heritage of the theatre. The speakers also pointed out that the camera can serve as a diagnostic tool and as a media for dramatic participation.

Jointly sponsored by AETA and SAA's Committee on Problems in Interpretation, the reading hour drew a large and approving audience. An exceptional program had been arranged by Marion McGuire with groups of students from seven Los Angeles high schools. The program included reading from "John Brown's Body," *Madwoman of Chaillot*, "The Man with the Broken Fingers," *The Boy with the Cart*, *Cradle Song*, *Darkness at Noon*, and other selections. Sister M. Agnese distributed

copies of interpretation materials for high school students—readings for solo and groups which had been compiled and gathered by her from extensive sources.

The first day of the conference was concluded on a high note—the very pleasant AETA Social Hour which was followed by a banquet and a particularly refreshing speaker. Television star Frank Baxter delighted the audience with his reminiscences and his imitations of bad public speaking. Baxter re-iterated the need for teaching English and Speech, since never before has clear and direct communication been so necessary to men. He voiced the hope that speech teachers will be able through “the slow leavening process of mass education gradually to raise the level of our national inarticulateness.”

The Thursday general session was a particularly enlightening one, proving to be entertaining as well as edifying. Raymond B. Allen, U.C.L.A. Chancellor, posed the problem of the relationship of society and the educational theatre. Because theatre is a living expression of the people and the times, Chancellor Allen believes that the theatre must “help man in the quest of self.” He also stressed that educational theatres must embrace a *practicum*—scripts must be performed, students must learn to live the idea of theatre. Frank Baxter also emphasized that educational theatre has the greatest channels for communicating all of man’s liberal values and ideas. “The drama is a great member of the family of Liberal Arts—it borrows from all the others, and it may serve the others magnificently. It is one of the greatest of artistic tools ever devised to inform men, and to give them a discipline of thought and feeling.” Willard Swire, Executive Director of ANTA, discussed the relationship of the

educational and commercial theatres. He revealed that the strongest link is in the training and development of actors in addition to fostering the development of new playwrights and training audiences.

One of the highest points of the convention was a section devoted to “finding theatre magic.” C. Lowell Lees had organized the session around a search for certain intangible, but valuable aspects of the theatre which bring magic to the mind and eye of the theatre-goer and the creative theatre artist.

In a charming and thoughtful speech, Hubert Heffner reminded his audience that in America no repertory theatre is devoted to plays of the past. This tends to cut off Americans from their dramatic heritage. “Our theatre has no solid substructure, no such solid base of a dramatic heritage kept constantly alive, such as that of the European theatre.”

Charles B. Lane (whose paper was read in his absence) explored his own experiences based on producing a musical play which combined in music and dance various elements of the theatre. Ross Smith discussed the benefits which can be derived by a liaison between the professional and amateur theatre. This can be effected by employing a visiting star or a professional director in the college theatre to stimulate student participation and theatre growth. A summation by C. Lowell Lees re-iterated the vital necessity for “magic” in the theatre and the difficulty at finding or engendering it.

IV

A novel plan, devised by Program Chairman Frank Whiting, enabled the delegates to devote the Thursday afternoon and evening to a divisional choice: children’s theatre, high-school, or junior-college theatre. Chairman for the children’s theatre program was Dick Adams,

assisted by Mel Helstein. The program was keynoted by a stimulating and unusual production of *Treasure Island*, which played to an enthusiastic audience of over 400 children and 100 adults. The design of the settings were bold and colorful (executed by Robert Webster); the director was Dick Adams.

The production was followed by a panel concerned with the idea that "everyone is responsible for children's theatre." A speech by Burdette Fitzgerald was read in which she re-iterated the significance of creative experiences for all children. Dorothy Allen described the Los Angeles Junior Programs. Entitled "Show-Time at UCLA," the Junior Programs sponsor a series of selected motion pictures, a dance concert, a musical concert, an opera, and plays. Mrs. Allen reported that the programs have been so successful that Junior Programs is now planning a "Show-Time" in various cooperating centers throughout greater Los Angeles, thereby reaching an even larger child audience. The third speaker was Bob Clampett, a puppeteer, who is the creator and producer of *Time for Beany*, a very successful West-Coast television show which is now on a network. Mr. Clampett related his experiences as cartoonist for Warner Brothers prior to his television work. He gave an account of how he blue-prints the major elements of the plot for *Beany* and how much improvisation is used during the actual performances.

A dinner followed the panel session, attended by forty Children's Theatre members. Paul Kozelka, Director of CTC, talked on the many resources of children's theatre on international, as well as regional and local, levels. He gave an enthusiastic account of CTC and stimulated much interest among the audience who were not CTC members. James E. Popovich, program Chairman

for the 1956 CTC Convention, described the plans for the Evanston conference and outlined plans and events of special interest. Three films made by the Department of Theatre Arts at UCLA concluded the program. One delightful, colorful, but brief film, entitled "The Princess and the Pin," particularly charmed the audience. Photographed and animated from children's drawings, the film elicited much comment and appreciation.

The high school sessions were held at Canoga Park High School, where a program was presented through the careful planning of Victor Becker, chairman, Marion Underwood, and Charlotte Kay Motter. Under the direction of Rachel Rosenthal, students of Pasadena Playhouse presented a program dealing with acting fundamentals. Exercises on concentration, relaxation, improvisation, pantomime, and creative dance were demonstrated and discussed. The last part of the Pasadena program was devoted to a demonstration of progressive steps in a rehearsal of Molière's *Les Precieuses Ridicules*, beginning with first readings and moving to late rehearsals. As the sequence progressed, the director made suggestions and improvised costumes from ribbons, scarves, and feathers in order to give the actors the necessary sense of the clothing of the period of the play.

The principal speaker for the evening was Agnes Moorehead, who devoted much of her time to explaining what was involved in the production of *Don Juan in Hell*. She stressed that preparation was exhausting yet stimulating and inspiring. She expressed the opinion that there ought to be some theatre where teachers can go and know what it is to be actors so that they may be better able to tell aspiring performers what they should know and do.

The final item on the program was a production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* by Canoga Park High School. The play as done by the high school students proved Charlotte Kay Motter's thesis (presented at the 1954 East Lansing conference) that the high-school play is no longer where the greatest amount of amusement can be gained from the mistakes of the actors, but that the high school can produce a play that will stand on its own merit.

The Junior and City College divisional meeting convened at the Santa Monica City College campus. The program for the afternoon was divided into two parts. The first was devoted to the display of the new little theatre plant at the Santa Monica City College, which had been awarded the American Architect Award. Mrs. Gene Owen, head of the theatre, explained the unique features of the little theatre and the even more unusual manner in which the building was planned. From the initial planning of the college campus, faculty members using each building were invited to sit with the architects and to design the function and arrangement of space. Over a four-year period, Mrs. Owen worked closely with the architects, approving plans and creating a theatre which would satisfy the needs of a particular program. The result of such cooperation between the instructor who used the building and the architects who designed the theatre plant is a beautiful little theatre that is intimate and flexible.

Demonstrations of the use of the building and creative work of the students were presented through slides and a guided tour of the building. Students of the college presented displays of original costumes, make-up, and sets. Transcription of original radio scripts were played from the sound booth, and

a student motion picture on the history of movies was shown in a classroom.

After the tour and demonstration, the members adjourned to the student lounge for coffee and the panel discussion. The panel was composed of Don Butler, Michael Griffin, Morgan Stock, and Fred McMahon. Butler touched upon the academic question: how does the college fulfill the needs of the student transferring to the university? Butler's answer was that the junior-college level was terminal for many students removed from large centers. Consequently, a general education program seemed to be the solution. Griffin outlined the program and offerings at San Francisco City College, while Morgan Stock presented the situation as it exists at Monterey Peninsula College. The last speaker, Fred McMahon, approached the question of success or failure by questioning the success of the junior college to meet the needs of the student who wishes to transfer to the university with junior standing. McMahon concluded that the junior-college drama programs, by and large, have not been successful because of the poor articulation between them and the universities and because the junior-college courses do not parallel one another in a satisfactory manner. The general discussion which followed indicated that many agreed that junior colleges are doing a satisfactory job in production but an inadequate job in preparing the student for transfer to the university. The group concluded that this last problem is a definite area worth further study by the Project Committee.

V

In addition to the divisional conferences on children's theatre, high school, and junior college theatre, three excellent sectional meetings (devoted

to opera, research, and graduate studies) were available. John Dietrich revealed that theatre, being a communicative art, can be measured and predicted. He insisted that it is possible to employ predictive methodology in theatre research to predetermine effect. Hubert Heffner decried the false division so often raised between research, teaching, and creative production. "It is false to oppose these aspects of the theatre teacher's work one against the other because theatre is a productive art, all aspects of which are equal." Norman Philbrick posed the problem of economic return to the graduate student and decried the lack of "dividends from their investment." He also made some proposals concerning the practical aspects of the graduate program—residence, major and minor areas, and internships.

In the session devoted to research, John Walker revealed that a large amount of critical research (theses and dissertations) indicate that graduate students are asserting themselves in an area of scholarship previously considered almost exclusively the domain of literature and English departments. Wendell Cole pointed out that in spite of many gaps in theatre research, there have been an amazing number of theses and dissertations during the past decade concerned exclusively with theatre history—with a major emphasis upon American theatre history. Joseph Stockdale showed that experimental research has been carried on in a number of technical areas. However, more needs to be done with studies on acting and on audience analysis. Joseph Baldwin reported that during the past ten years, the number of original plays, translations, and adaptations allowed as theses for graduate credit has shown a small but steady increase. At least thirty-

three schools have offered graduate thesis credit for original plays in the past ten years.

The sectional meeting on opera was a lively one and, although there were absences due to illness, the messages were read. Frank Magers wrote that the correct style of operatic production is to be found "only by returning to the best traditional manner." He denounced the present trend toward productional innovation which often "belies the original intention of the librettist and the composer." Herbert Stahl took an opposing point of view. He emphasized that the greatest need for the musician in opera is to arouse the largely dormant sense of theatre. In a stage production, "he can no longer hide behind the cloak of tradition." Walther Volbach theorized that the director's first step is not "one of analysis of the libretto but an understanding of the composition." All agreed that harmony of musical and theatrical elements is absolutely essential.

Perhaps the most popular event of the second day of the conference was the spectacular luncheon planned by Father Gilbert Hartke. Among the motion picture personnel were Robert Schnitzler, Ginger Rogers, Dore Shary, David Selznick, Charles Gluck, William Dozier, Irene Dunn, and many others. Principal speaker was Ginger Rogers, who praised the training of actors and technicians being carried on in the schools and who reminded her listeners that this enrichment and broadening was not going unnoticed by Hollywood. Father Hartke also read a message from President Eisenhower which described teachers in dramatic arts and self-expression as key personnel in combating "ideological attacks on America's way of life."

VI

The third day of the convention held much in store for the delegates, with two excellent speakers featured at the general session. The American playwright Emmel Lavery discussed the place of the theatre in the day of automation. He decried the type of scholars who do too much analysis and not enough creative work. These he termed "vivisectionists of the art form." A playwright's abstract ideas are of little value if his plays are not being produced. Motion picture producer John Houseman analyzed the *why* of the theatre need. He pointed out that the essence of the theatre—the actor, the audience (which makes a free offer of suspension of disbelief for the duration of the play), and the playwright (who takes advantage of this)—is the most potent instrument of our society.

A demonstration-discussion of direction techniques proved basic but rewarding to those attending. John Wray Young opened the session with some thoughtful words on the vital necessity of training adequate directors. "Attention to the director at all educational and post graduate levels is our surest way to increase the quality of the American theatre." Demonstrations followed, with Arthur Ballet directing a scene from *Our Town* and Warren Lee doing a right and wrong method of staging scenes from *Sparkin'*. A spirited panel session discussed the demonstrations.

Two sessions were devoted to technical demonstrations. The two papers presented at the first meeting concerned "Simplicity in Design" (Hugo Melchione) and "Minimum Lighting" (Berry McGee). Melchione discussed simplicity not only as a frequent economic necessity but as a constantly desirable virtue; while McGee em-

phasized that the production should be analogous with the lighting available, and that one should not choose a play that would suffer because of improper lighting.

In the next technical session, Nordstrom Whited discussed new construction materials and technique and showed how several recent commercial developments will have exciting theatrical application. Speaking on lighting research and development, Joel Rubin indicated that the present thinking behind equipment design is the desire to achieve "precise and exacting control over all of the controllable properties of light." Vern Adix advanced some thoughts on the problem of technical developments.

The convention closed on a delightful evening spent in Pasadena at a banquet and later at an excellent production by the Pasadena Playhouse. At the banquet Paul Gregory made some observations in the art of being a producer in the American theatre today. He revealed that it is his and Charles Laughton's ambition "to take a great piece of literature across the country each year." He testified to the interest of some persons in commercial theatre, himself among them, in interpreting the classics and in bringing the interpretation to large numbers of people and thereby establish for himself a kinship with educational theatre. Mr. Gregory claimed he was not sentimental about the Broadway theatre, which he referred to as "an industrial block" and not a "New York theatre."

VII

The Los Angeles convention will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the most star-studded conferences of recent AETA history. This *seems* to suggest that the meeting will be remembered only for the delightful and memor-

able but nonetheless somewhat superficial trappings. In reality the 1955 convention had substance as well. The provocative sessions on playwriting, finding theatre magic, graduate studies, as well as many others, have left enduring proof that it was not all mere rhetoric. Rather, dedicated people of the theatre had come from many sections of the country to deliberate, evaluate, and conjecture—in an intelligent and leavening way—about the present state of the American theatre.

The spark that Frank Whiting ignited by his careful planning of the 1955 program will be fanned for some time to come by the imagination and industry of the delegates. Jack Morrison, who succeeds to the onerous task of planning the 1956 convention, is already at work formulating another program to appeal to AETA members. Let us hope that it will make a visit to Chicago this coming Christmas as valuable an experience as was the rewarding trek to Los Angeles.